

Radical Television Drama

Introduction

John Hill

The origins of this issue reside in a season of television dramas, entitled ‘United Kingdom!: Radical Television Drama Before and During Thatcher’, that ran at BFI Southbank from November to December 2009. The season was conceived by members of staff (Susanna Capon, John Hill, Jonathan Powell and Rob Turnock) in the Department of Media Arts at Royal Holloway, University of London and was jointly curated with Marcus Prince of the BFI. In all, the season involved screenings of over 20 programmes that ranged from Episode 1 of *Diary of a Young Man* (1964) and *Up the Junction* (1965) to *The Deal* (2003), *The Government Inspector* (2005) and a new episode of *Shameless* (2009). There were panel discussions (on changes in the organisation of broadcasting and ‘the new radical drama’) as well as on-stage interviews with a variety of television practitioners (including Tony Garnett, Ken Trodd, Roy Battersby, Margaret Matheson, Roy Minton, Peter Flannery, Michael Wearing and Stephen Frears).¹ John Hill and Derek Paget also delivered public lectures to accompany the season and these now appear, in a revised form, in this special issue of the *Journal of British Cinema and Television* on ‘Radical Television Drama’.

The inspiration for the season of screenings and discussions derived from two key events. 2009 was, of course, the thirtieth anniversary of the arrival to power of a new style of Conservative government, led by Margaret Thatcher. This event has often been taken to constitute a significant watershed in postwar politics as a result of the new government’s abandonment of the old social democratic ‘consensus’ (involving an ideological commitment to Keynesianism, full employment and public welfare provision) in favour of a socially divisive, ‘free market’ economic neo-liberalism. Thatcherism’s reshaping of the political and economic landscape also involved

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changes to the funding and management of broadcasting in Britain and one of the goals of the season was to explore the ways in which television, pre- and post-Thatcher, had been transformed and how this had affected the possibilities for the production of 'radical television drama'. These questions appeared to assume a particular importance following the events of October 2008 when the free market capitalism championed by politicians over the preceding 30 years succeeded in bringing the global economy to the verge of collapse and, in the case of the UK, led to the state bailing out large financial corporations, such as Northern Rock, HBOS and RBS, on the grounds that they were 'too big to fail'. In a situation where the old ideological shibboleths and nostrums no longer seemed to prevail, it therefore seemed appropriate to ask what role, if any, television drama might have in responding to these new economic and political circumstances.

It would be fair to say that the season was circumspect about what it took to be the meaning of 'radical television drama'. In the programme notes accompanying the season, Marcus Prince referred to work 'seeking to challenge the prevailing establishment, explore the inequalities within society or push at the boundaries of morality and taste' (Prince 2009). However, the idea of the 'radical' was deliberately left open in order to investigate how the idea of the 'radical' might have changed and how this might be seen to relate to changes in both the political climate and institutional situation of TV. The screening of an episode of *Shameless*, and the involvement of Bryan Elsley, the creator of *Skins* (2007–), in a panel discussion on 'the new radical drama' certainly provoked reflections upon how the meaning of 'radical television drama' had altered and of what it might now be said to consist.

This emphasis upon plurality and change is hardly surprising. As Raymond Williams has pointed out, in his indispensable *Keywords* (1976), the use of the term 'radical' as an adjective derives from the fourteenth century and only acquired a set of political connotations in the eighteenth century. Since then, however, the term has been associated with a range of political positions that have embraced liberalism, socialism ('the radical left') and extreme conservatism ('the radical right'). The idea of the 'radical', therefore, can hardly be said to possess a single, unchanging meaning and has, inevitably, varied according to historical circumstances. Nevertheless, within the history of television drama, it is fair to say that the term 'radical' has been associated primarily with liberal or left-wing perspectives that involve a critique of the status quo (and, in some cases, the canvassing of social and political alternatives to it). Indeed, it became something

of a matter of concern for the Governors and management of the BBC in the late 1960s and 1970s that it was unable to discover right-wing writers who might 'balance' the left-wing 'bias' of 'politically committed' playwrights during this period. Thus, while the BBC took the view that the bulk of television drama was conservative with a small 'c', owing to the way in which it maintained support for prevailing institutions and provided a form of 'social cement', the transmission of explicitly right-wing plays was taken to be much rarer than that of left-wing ones (Home Office 1977: 263).²

However, while 'radical drama' has tended to be identified with particular kinds of (liberal-left) politics, such work has also been caught up in debates about the specific artistic forms that 'radicalism' might assume. Particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, the idea of 'radicalism' was not merely associated with 'radical' social and political content but also a commitment to certain kinds of formal invention and experimentation. As has often been noted, the rallying call for a 'new kind of drama' was historically associated with Troy Kennedy Martin's appeal for a revolt against the theatricalism associated with what he referred to as television's 'naturalism' (1964: 21–33). The co-author of *Diary of a Young Man* (1964), the late John McGrath, is interviewed by Lez Cooke in this issue and reveals the enthusiasm at this time for employing new techniques and experimenting with television grammar. Although McGrath partly disputes this, *Diary of a Young Man* has been widely understood to be a drama that employs Brechtian techniques as one means of subverting 'naturalist' conventions. However, as Billy Smart indicates, there has been relatively little discussion of how Brecht's own plays were adapted for television and how they too might be seen to challenge the prevailing conventions of television drama at this time. In a discussion of *The Life of Galileo* (1964), he sets out to demonstrate how Brecht's own work could provide the means for extending the boundaries of studio drama in a way that departed from the television methods to which Kennedy Martin had objected.

One of the (possibly surprising) features of Kennedy Martin's manifesto, however, is the way in which its call for the invention of new techniques is only tangentially linked to a wish to see these lay the basis for the expression of new (social and political) ideas (Hill 2007: 64–5). As Hill indicates in his contribution to the issue, the emergence of a new kind of politically radical drama might be said to have begun with the work of Jim Allen, whose *The Big Flame* (1969) proved so uncomfortable for the BBC that it was withheld from transmission for nearly two years. This was the first of many controversies surrounding

'politically committed' drama over the next few years and, by focusing on the work of the television director, Roy Battersby – from *Five Women* (also withheld from transmission for two years) to *Leeds United!* – Hill seeks to shed light on the artistic and political issues at stake (as well as to indicate how, even at this juncture, the production of 'radical' drama was often met with considerable opposition).

As with the television plays of Ken Loach, Battersby's work was associated with a movement out of the television studio in favour of location shooting on film. Although shooting drama on film (and video) subsequently became the norm, it is nonetheless worth recalling just how 'radical' (and upsetting) this development was sometimes perceived to be, particularly when it involved what was viewed as an 'illegitimate' mixing of drama and documentary devices. Although, as Derek Paget suggests, there has since been a much greater acceptance of the 'porousness' of generic boundaries, his discussion of *The Deal* and *The Government Inspector* (2003) also indicates how the mixing of documentary and drama conventions continues, some 30 years on, to provide one of the main ways whereby television drama may succeed in 'making mischief' and putting into question the half-truths and evasions associated with those in political power.

While some of the most celebrated moments of radical television drama involved location shooting on film (which was often regarded as a precondition for engaging with social and political actualities), Leah Panos argues that the television studio could be well suited to the production of certain kinds of political plays as well. Focusing on Trevor Griffiths' contribution to the series *Fall of Eagles* – 'Absolute Beginners' (1974) – she shows how the space of the studio, and the televisual vocabulary associated with it, is particularly helpful in articulating the play's exploration of the tensions between the personal and political and the relationship of these to matters of gender. In doing so, she also indicates how the idea of the 'radical' began to change from the 1970s onwards and, in the wake of the emergence of new kinds of 'identity' politics, 'radical' drama increasingly came to engage with questions of gender, sexuality, 'race' and ethnicity.

The article by Sarita Malik briefly charts an alternative history of 'radical television drama' dealing with the politics of race and ethnicity before going on to suggest how the highly controversial drama *Shoot the Messenger* (2006) might be claimed to be radical despite the offence it caused to many members of the Black community. In this way, the idea of the radical also suggests how such work acts not simply to give expression to pre-existing political perspectives but also provides a form of interrogation of these positions from within. The article also

highlights how complex the process of unravelling the ‘radical’ content of individual texts may prove. This is made evident, for example, in the essays by Stephen Harper on *Occupation* (2009) and Steve Baker on *Early Doors* (2003–4).

Peter Bowker’s three-part serial *Occupation*, on British involvement in the Iraq war, was widely regarded as an exceptional television drama that maintained the ethical seriousness and questioning of the best ‘radical’ drama (see, for example, Caughie 2010: 42). However, Harper subjects the programme to a rigorous analysis that highlights some of the limitations of its representation of the war and draws attention to its political silences. By contrast, Baker turns to a sitcom, *Early Doors* (2003–4), which, by his own admission, looks at first glance to be anything but a ‘radical’ drama (certainly when compared to earlier working-class dramas such as *The Big Flame* and *Leeds United!*). However, in an era when the idea of the ‘radical’ has become the property of the proponents of economic neo-liberalism, *Early Doors* might nonetheless provide a view of the world that puts into question the values, and presumed virtues, of the prevailing political and economic order.

As such, both analyses confirm what has already been suggested: that what is meant by the term ‘radical’, and therefore the idea of ‘radical television drama’, is not fixed but subject to historical change. This also means that the aesthetic forms and strategies employed by ‘radical television drama’ do not remain unchanged but grow out of, and adapt to, particular sets of circumstances. Indeed, as many of the articles also indicate, the possibilities for ‘radical drama’, and the impact that it may achieve, cannot be understood in terms of textual features alone but must also be accounted for in relation to the political and institutional contexts in which they are both produced and received. Covering a period of over 40 years (albeit selectively rather than comprehensively), this special issue of the journal not only charts some of the vagaries of the history of ‘radical television drama’ but also identifies some of the different ways in which the ‘radical’ may be seen to have manifested itself in changing political times.

Notes

1. Edited recordings of the two panels and two of the interviews may be found at <http://www.bfi.org.uk/live/series/448>.
2. For the same reason, *The Falklands Play*, which was initially shelved by the BBC in the run-up to the 1987 election, was one of the few overtly ‘right-wing’ productions that we could identify for inclusion in the ‘radical drama’ season at the BFI.

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